

Sexual Health Education for Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities

EVIDENCE SUMMARY



Adolescents with intellectual disabilities, like all individuals, have the right to sexual health education that provides them with the knowledge, skills, and ability to make informed decisions related to their own sexual health.

Common Myths

Adolescents with intellectual disabilities:

- are asexual and do not have sexual desires
- are “perpetual children” who need support and are unable to make decisions for themselves
- are unable to consent to sexual activity
- will be more sexually aggressive, promiscuous, and/or more likely to commit sexual offenses if they are given information about sex

Research Evidence

Adolescents with intellectual disabilities:

- have the same sexual needs and desires regarding their sexuality as adolescents without disabilities
- engage in dating and sexual activity at similar or higher rates than other adolescents
- often lack knowledge that can lead to increased sexual risk-taking behaviours (e.g., not using contraception) and negative sexual health outcomes (e.g., unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections)
- may find social interactions challenging and may not know how to develop healthy relationships

Research also shows that sexual health education for individuals with intellectual disabilities is associated with a number of positive outcomes. These include:

- learning how to have healthy relationships
- learning how to make their own decisions related to their sexual health
- reducing vulnerability to sexual abuse
- reducing inappropriate sexual expression

Recommendations for Education Programs and Resources

For sexual health education to be effective, it is important to adapt materials and programs to meet the social and communicative needs of adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Individualized programming may be necessary to address the range of abilities, skills, and learning styles found within this population. Limitations may exist in conceptual, social, and/or practical adaptive skills, and may include:

- low literacy
- difficulty with memory and with understanding abstract concepts (e.g., trust, consent, and privacy)
- slower rate of learning than their non-disabled peers
- difficulties with finding, forming, and maintaining both friendships and sexual relationships

Important strategies to consider include:

- starting with basic information and moving to more complex issues
- assessing knowledge and learning by asking questions and getting adolescents to respond in their own words
- providing comprehensive information about a wide range of relevant topics (see *Sexual Health Topics to Include* on following page)
- repetition of material
- using concrete examples to explain different points
- going through information slowly to allow time for processing, asking questions, and having discussions
- practicing the material through role-play, modelling, and rehearsal
- providing skills training relevant to sex refusal, resisting peer pressure, and communicating with sexual partners
- involving parents, caregivers, and professionals who can help with repetition and reinforcement of information
- involving peers, including non-disabled peers, to share information and provide opportunities for observation and interaction



Sexual Health Topics to Include

- information relevant to puberty and personal sexual health (including understanding the body, reproduction, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections)
- condom use and birth control
- consent and how to communicate with sexual partners
- how to build social skills to engage in healthy dating and sexual relationships
- positive sexual identity, including discussion of sexual touch as pleasurable or natural
- prevention of abuse and exploitation, and how to report abuse
- what is appropriate in private versus public settings (e.g., touch, masturbation)
- information about diverse sexual and gender identities

For more information about sexual health education for adolescents with intellectual disabilities, including examples of instructional models and a complete list of references, please refer to the complete literature review titled, “Sexual Health Education for Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities” available at <http://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/sexual-health-education-for-adolescents-with-intellectual-disabilities-2/>.